AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF CHINESE COLLEGE STUDENTS' AUTONOMY DEVELOPMENT AND PARENTAL INFLUENCE

by

Tian Tian

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STATEMENT OF DISSERTATION APPROVAL

The dissertation of **Tian Tian**

has been approved by the following supervisory committee members:

Lawrence Henry Liese	, Chair	**5/18/2015** Date Approved
Jaehee Yi	, Member	**5/18/2015** Date Approved
Jason Castillo	, Member	**5/18/2015** Date Approved
David Derezotes	, Member	**5/18/2015** Date Approved
Guoxiu Tian	, Member	**5/18/2015** Date Approved

and by **Lawrence Henry Liese**, Chair/Dean of the Department/College/School of **Social Work**

and by David B. Kieda, Dean of The Graduate School.

ABSTRACT

Autonomy is a basic psychological need for human beings and is closely related to people's well-being and optimal functioning according to self-determination theory (SDT). In China, which is in transition from a traditional collectivist society to a more competitive and individualistic society, college students' autonomy development may be challenged. Given that little is known about Chinese college students' autonomy, this qualitative study explores the process of their autonomy development as well as parents' role in that process.

A grounded theory approach guided this study, since little was known about the topic. The study also examined the applicability of SDT and emerging adulthood theory to participant experiences. Purposive sampling was used to recruit 26 participants for in-depth interviews. The data were analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding, following the classic grounded theory approach.

The process of autonomy development of the participants was revealed in the results. Before entering college, participants' autonomy was underdeveloped, and they relied mostly on their parents for decision-making. Between high school and college, participants were involved in choosing a college major after taking their college entrance examination. For many, this marked the first time in their lives they had participated in major decision-making. After the selection of a college major, participants started to actively explore autonomy in college by making various decisions on their own. In this

process of autonomy development, parents' attitudes towards their children's autonomy changed, from pressuring participants to follow their opinions to becoming supportive for participants' independent decision-making. In addition, parents provided two types of support, emotional and instrumental, to their children in the process of their autonomy development. Participants demonstrated a generally good mental health situation.

Chinese traditional culture and the country's education system were discussed as two main factors contributing to the unique pattern of autonomy development among participants. Cultural differences were discussed to deepen the understanding of Chinese college students' autonomy. Additionally, other cultural factors were examined as to their impact on participants' mental health and parental attitude change. The implications for policy, practice, and future research as well as study strengths and limitations were presented.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background

Psychosocial Difficulties Among Chinese College Students

Since higher education was recovered in China in 1978 after a political disturbance, the number of people entering college per year has been increasing rapidly. In 1998, according to the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (n. d.), there were 3,408,764 students enrolled in regular undergraduate programs. In 2012, the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China reported 23,913,155 enrolled undergraduate students and 1,719,818 enrolled graduate students in regular higher education institutes (Ministry of Education, 2012). Those numbers do not include students enrolled in adult higher education institutes, part-time graduate programs, or web-based undergraduate programs.

Chinese college students have been considered as having a bright future and have undertaken great expectations from society. However, the psychosocial health of this population has been recognized as a serious social problem since the 1990s, and has drawn attention from the public and researchers because of the high incidence of suicide and homicide among this group (Ji, 2011). According to Li (2002), the suicide rate in China was about 10.63 per 100,000 for adolescents aged 15–24 years in 1998, which was

one of the highest in the world. Some international reports indicate that the percentage of Chinese college students who have emotional problems has been more than 16% (Ma, 2007). The most frequently reported psychological issues among this population are depression, distress, anxiety, self-inferiority, and social withdrawal (Li, Wang, & Wang, 2009; Wang & Marsella, 1999; Xiong & Deng, 2010; Zhang, 2007; Zhang, Yu, & Zhao, 2006). Those reported psychological problems are found to be related to difficulties in social relationships and academic performance (Liu, 2005). They are also possibly associated with deeper psychological problems of Chinese college students, such as the underdevelopment of self-identity and an inability to adapt to new environments (Liu, 2005).

A number of studies have been conducted to explore causes of these psychosocial difficulties among Chinese college students. Possible correlates and factors, from different categories such as social context, family education, and school education, have been discussed by researchers. Several factors were claimed to play major roles in Chinese college students' psychosocial difficulties. For example, the rapid social change in China creates a more competitive environment and makes Chinese youth's future less predictable (Liu, 2005; Wang & Wu, 2003). Moreover, problematic family and school education fail to support Chinese students in adapting to a transitioning and increasingly competitive society (Liu, 2005; Wang & Wu, 2003). In the discussion of contributing factors, autonomy was recognized as a significant factor related to Chinese college students' psychological and social difficulties (Hu, 2010; Li, Wang, & Wang, 2009; Liu, 2005; Ma, 2007). Autonomy is considered a basic and universal psychological need for human beings and is closely related to people's well-being and optimal functioning (Ryan

& Deci, 2000). Chinese researchers argue that a lack of autonomy and being over-dependent on parents is an important contributor to Chinese college students' psychosocial problems (Hu, 2010; Li, Wang, & Wang, 2009; Liu, 2005; Ma, 2007).

Autonomy in Chinese College Students

In China, autonomy is not emphasized in the traditional collectivistic culture, which values solidarity, concern for others, and integration with other people (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). Bringing up an independent and self-reliant child is not a major concern for Chinese parents, as it is in other Asian cultures (Neuliep, 2000). Instead, it is much more important to establish interdependent, cooperative, and harmonious relations between the child and other members of the family, group, and society (Yi & Park, 2003). In such a collectivist society, parents tend not to encourage their children to be independent at a young age. This tendency has been enhanced by the One-Child policy in China. Researchers report that college students who are the only child in their families are more likely to be over-dependent on his or her parents and lack autonomy, probably because the parents tend to take care of everything for their only child, including making decisions for him or her (Hu, 2010; Liu, 2005, Ma, 2007).

On the other hand, a rapid economic change in China toward a market-oriented economic system leads to a relatively more competitive and individualistic society. This social transition seems to enhance the need for young people to focus on the self and gain autonomy early. In fact, autonomy related characteristics – such as expression of personal opinions, self-direction, and self-confidence – have been more and more valued, and actually promoted, by many schools in today's China as a part of their educational goals

(Chen, Cen, Li, & He, 2005). These characteristics seem to be required by the more competitive environment in China. Moreover, in the context of globalization, today's Chinese society is being more and more influenced by Western culture, making independence and self-determination valued as significant characteristics of a successful person. This change of social values in China can be partly demonstrated in some studies: Research in the early 1990s (Chen, Rubin, & Sun, 1992) found that shy, wary, and sensitive behavior among Chinese young people was associated with positive outcomes – such as social competence, leadership, and peer acceptance – since this behavior reflected group dependence and social restraint, which are valued in the traditional Chinese culture (Ho, 1986; Lau, 1996). However, by 2002, shyness was related to peer rejection, school problems, and depression in Chinese children (Chen, Cen, Li, & He, 2005). These social and cultural changes may be promoted by the use of media such as the Internet and influence Chinese youth the most, since they gain access to youth culture in other parts of the world, especially in the Western world (Nelson & Chen, 2007).

Therefore, in this transition or intersection of traditional and Western values, tensions have been created in the autonomy development of Chinese youth. Specifically, there is serious conflict between the traditional parenting style and the youth's need for autonomy development. Yau and Smetana's (1996) study demonstrated that Chinese adolescents desired greater autonomy in decision-making than their parents granted them, and greater parental control was significantly related to more serious parent-child conflicts. These findings are consistent with other research (Lau, 1992) indicating that Chinese in Mainland China, Singapore, and Hong Kong emphasize personal values (such as freedom and personal achievement) and that desires for freedom, independence, and

individuality are prevalent among young Chinese (Lau, 1992).

In sum, under the unique cultural and political context in China, on one hand, autonomy has always been undervalued by the traditional culture, but on the other hand, autonomy is desired by the youth and also required by an increasingly competitive society. This gap may be one of the important causes of Chinese college students' psychosocial difficulties such as the underdevelopment of self-identity, emotional difficulties, poor social adjustment, and poor social relationships (Hu, 2010; Liu, 2005; Ma, 2007; Wang & Wu, 2003; Wang & Wang, 2009). However, there are few empirical studies that explore the autonomy of Chinese college students and how it impacts their psychosocial functioning. Thus, there is a need to explore and better understand how Chinese college students develop their autonomy as well as how their autonomy relates to their psychosocial health. In addition, given the observed tensions and problems between Chinese college students and their parents regarding autonomy issues (Hu, 2010; Lau, 1992; Li, Wang, & Wang, 2009; Liu, 2005; Ma, 2007; Yau & Smetana, 1996), more research should be done to examine how parents involve themselves in students' autonomy development.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

The purpose of this exploratory study is to identify how autonomous Chinese college students are, how their autonomy has been developed, how their autonomy relates to their psychosocial well-being, and what roles parents play in that process. The study is part of a larger cross-cultural study of college students from China, South Korea, and the United States examining psychosocial development issues, such as identity exploration,

autonomy development, and other related areas.

The study will contribute to the literature in the field of youth development in several ways. First, Chinese college students' experiences of autonomy development and related factors will be described and better understood. The study may contribute to the knowledge about how autonomous Chinese college students are, what the process of autonomy development is like for Chinese college students, the role of parents in Chinese college students' development of autonomy, and how culture is related to the potential uniqueness of Chinese college students' autonomy development. Second, this study can serve as a base for more descriptive and causal research on Chinese young people's autonomy. Based on the results of this study, more research can be undertaken to explore correlates of Chinese college students' autonomy. Additionally, more research on autonomy can be conducted for other groups of young people in China, such as non-college youths, to generate a more comprehensive and relatively accurate representation of Chinese young people's autonomy development. Furthermore, the study can also offer a base for cross-cultural comparisons and contribute to understandings about cultural impact on young people's autonomy development.

Third, study results will contribute to a better understanding of the cross-cultural applicability of two theories, emerging adulthood (EA) theory and self-determination theory (SDT), both of which are used in the study. These two theories maintain a Western bias, and more cross-cultural research is needed to support their universality as well as advance their development. This study can then make theoretical contributions by applying two theories to a non-Western subject group and cultural process, namely Chinese young people's autonomy development. Fourth, this study may contribute to the

literature on macro- and microservice related to Chinese youth, helping Chinese teachers, parents, counselors, school social workers, and policy makers understand how to support young people's autonomy development. In addition to its potential contributions to research literature and theory development, this study is expected to provide direction for social work education, practice, and policy, particularly for the study population of Chinese college students and, by extension, their families. The study's findings may deepen understanding of cultural differences in human development and contribute to social work curriculum and course development, especially in the areas of human behavior in the social environment (HBSE) and direct practice with emerging adults. For example, evidence-based services in the United States, such as parenting programs, youth development programs, and support groups, may be applicable in the Chinese context, helping Chinese practitioners, teachers, parents, and policy makers better understand how to support Chinese college students' autonomy development. Finally, the study may contribute to the ongoing reform of Chinese education policy by drawing more attention to students' psychosocial development, rather than only their academic performance.

Theoretical Foundations

This study uses emerging adulthood (EA) theory and self-determination theory (SDT) to guide the examination of Chinese college students' autonomy development. EA theory proposes a new concept, *emerging adulthood*, to describe the stage of human development between adolescence and young adulthood. This concept was recognized due to a series of new issues with youth development in modern society, such as prolonged education, delayed marriage, and more dependence on parents (Smith, 2011).

These social and cultural issues position emerging adulthood as a new stage of human development. Therefore, EA theory, by taking such contemporary issues into account, is relevant and can provide a deeper understanding of the lives of today's young people. Further, EA theory justifies the significance of studying college students who are emerging adults.

SDT is a well-known and credible theory, which offers a relatively sound construction of human behaviors and the psychological motivations behind them. SDT's assumptions about human's psychological need for autonomy and how autonomy functions provide a rationale for the significance of autonomy, as well as a framework to guide the examination of Chinese college students' autonomy. For the current study, these two theories, which are discussed in more detail in Chapter 2, effectively complement one another: EA theory recognizes the significance of autonomy development in emerging adulthood, and SDT provides a relatively accurate framework for exploring the autonomy of emerging adults. Gaining autonomy is not only a central developmental task for adolescents, but also a crucial milestone for emerging adults. Thus, taken together EA theory and SDT provide meaningful guidelines for the examination of autonomy in Chinese college students, a group of emerging adults.

Study Methodology

The study uses qualitative research methodology to pursue its research questions, given that little is known about this topic. As the study is intended to inform future research and also contribute to theory development, the researcher will use a grounded theory approach to examine the topic. Grounded theory methodology is "particularly

appropriate for studies seeking new theoretical explanations built on previous knowledge to explain variances in the field" (Grbich, 2007, p.70). This approach is particularly suitable for the current study, since the study is applying EA theory and SDT to a new cultural context and seeking understanding about Chinese college students' autonomy. Moreover, contemporary grounded theory is considered a highly flexible and adaptable research methodology, which means that it can be easily adapted to the research questions, context, and population (Charmaz, 2003). In addition, the creative and inductive nature of grounded theory methodology provides enough room for the author to interpret data and apply insights, which can be very helpful given that little is known about the research topic.

Conclusion

This chapter discusses the background of the research topic, as well as the purpose and significance of the study. The theoretical foundations, study methodology, and implications for social work were also covered. The next chapter reviews the literature relating to Chinese college students' autonomy and parental influence in their development of autonomy. Two theoretical perspectives of the study are also discussed. Chapter 3 explains study methods, including the study design, research paradigm, the use of self in research, participant selection, data collection and procedures, and trustworthiness. Chapter 4 presents results of the data analysis. The final chapter discusses the study's findings and their implications for policy, practice, and future research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

As discussed in Chapter 1, traditional Chinese culture values solidarity, concern for others, and integration with other people (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). It is important for Chinese people to establish interdependent, cooperative, and harmonious relations with other members of their families, groups, and society (Yi & Park, 2003). Chinese young people's autonomy is underdeveloped in this collectivist culture because parents tend not to encourage their children to be independent at a young age. This tendency has been enhanced by the One-Child policy in China because the parents tend to take care of everything for their only child, including making decisions for him or her (Hu, 2010; Liu, 2005, Ma, 2007). However, there has been a rapid economic change toward a market-oriented economic system in China, bringing a series of social and cultural changes, which lead to a relatively more competitive and individualistic society. This social transition seems to enhance the need for young people to focus on the self and gain autonomy early. Thus, autonomy is desired by Chinese young people and also required by a competitive society. Under this social and cultural transition, tensions have been created in autonomy development for Chinese college students. The conflict between a strong desire for autonomy and lack of support for

developing it may be an important cause of Chinese college students' psychological and social difficulties such as the underdevelopment of self-identity, emotional problems, poor social adjustment, and poor social relationships (Hu, 2010; Liu, 2005, Ma, 2007; Wang & Wu, 2003; Wang & Wang, 2009).

In order to get a full picture of this issue as well as provide justifications and guidance to the study, this chapter reviews key theories and available literature related to autonomy, Chinese college students, and parental influence in autonomy. The discussions surrounding two key theories, emerging adulthood (EA) theory and self-determination theory (SDT), constitute a theoretical base for the study. EA theory offers theoretical support for the choice of the study population and provides a new way to understand the population. SDT provides a rationale for the significance of autonomy and offers a framework to guide the examination of autonomy development of Chinese college students. After the discussion of theoretical perspectives, literature is reviewed on emerging adults' autonomy and parental involvement in autonomy development, with a focus on Chinese college students.

Theoretical Framework of the Study

Emerging Adulthood Theory – A Way to Understand Chinese College Students

The rapid development of the global economy since the 1960s has led to a series of social and cultural changes in contemporary industrialized societies, such as undermining stable, lifelong careers and replacing them with careers with lower security, more frequent job changes, and an ongoing need for new training and education (Arnett,

2004; Smith, 2011). This situation contributes to a number of changes in regards to youth development, such as lengthening time spent in higher education and the delay of marriage (Arnett, 2000, 2004; Shanahan, 2000). These social changes among youth have also been supported by widespread birth control technologies (Smith, 2011), as well as increasing financial and other support from parents (Cohen & Casper, 2002). Further, postmodernism and poststructuralism developed under and still contribute to these economic and social changes, with resulting uncertainty, difference, fluidity, ambiguity, self-construction, changing identities, and so on (Smith, 2011).

These social and cultural issues contribute to a prolonged period between adolescence and adulthood. According to Arnett (2004), the rise in the ages of entering marriage and parenthood, the lengthening of higher education, and prolonged job instability during the 20s reflect the emergence of a new period of life for young people in the United States and other industrialized societies, lasting from the late teens through the late 20s. This period is not simply an "extended adolescence," because it is much freer from parental control, and much more a period of independent exploration than adolescence (Arnett, 2004). Nor is it really "young adulthood," since this term demonstrates that an early stage of adulthood has been achieved, whereas most young people in their 20s have not completed the transitions associated with adult status, especially marriage and parenthood (Arnett, 2004). Additionally, many of them feel that they have not yet reached adulthood (Arnett, 2004). Hence, Arnett (2004) created a new term, *emerging adulthood* (EA), for this in-between period, which is usually from 18 to 29. He proposed five main features to describe emerging adulthood.

Identity exploration

The first feature of EA is identity exploration. Arnett (2004) claims that the process of identity formation begins in adolescence but intensifies in emerging adulthood. This identity formation process involves exploration mainly in love and work. In love exploration, the process is tentative and transient in adolescence, but involves a deep level of intimacy in emerging adulthood. The implicit question of love exploration for emerging adults is more identity-focused: "What kind of person am I, and what kind of person would suit me best as a partner through life" (Arnett, 2004, p.9). In work, there is a similar contrast between the transient and tentative explorations of adolescence and the more serious and identity-focused explorations of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2004, p.9). Most American adolescents have a part-time job at some point during high school, but usually their jobs are temporary and unrelated to the work they expect to be doing in adulthood. They tend to view their jobs as a way to obtain the money that will support an active leisure life rather than as occupational preparation (Arnett, 2004). In emerging adulthood, work experiences become more focused on preparing for an adult occupation. In exploring various work and educational possibilities, emerging adults explore identity issues as well: "What kind of work am I good at? What kind of work would I find satisfying for the long term? What are my chances of getting a job in the field that seems to suit me best" (Arnett, 2004, p.9). As they try out different jobs or college majors, emerging adults learn more about themselves.

Instability

The second feature of EA is instability. Emerging adulthood (EA) is an exceptionally unstable period of life due to the intensive explorations in love and work. In the process of exploration, emerging adults often change their minds or revise their plans for education, work, love and other areas. Every time they make changes to their plans, they learn something about themselves and hopefully take a step toward clarifying the type of future they want (Arnett, 2004, 11). According to Arnett (2004), the best illustration of instability in emerging adulthood is the frequency of moving from one residence to another.

Self-focusing

The third feature of EA is self-focusing. According to Arnett (2004), EA is the most self-focused time during a lifetime. Before emerging adulthood, youths live with their parents and have to follow a series of family rules and be responsible to other family members on a daily basis. In adulthood, people get married and have a relatively stable job, which means they have a series of responsibilities towards their families and work. It is only in between, during emerging adulthood, that there are few ties that entail daily obligations and commitments to others (Arnett, 2004). Most young Americans leave home at age 18 or 19, and moving out means that daily life is much more self-focused. They need to make decisions by themselves every day. It is found that people perceive the most control over the significant events in their lives during emerging adulthood, which is a reflection of emerging adulthood as the self-focused age, the time when people are most likely to have the freedom to make decisions as they wish (Arnett, 2006).

Feeling in-between

Arnett (2004) claims that the fourth feature of emerging adulthood is feeling in-between. Youths in this period feel neither adolescent nor adult since emerging adulthood does not have the restrictions of adolescence nor the responsibilities of adulthood; this period is characterized by explorations and instabilities (Arnett, 2004). One study exploring emerging adulthood found this feature particularly true with most emerging adults (Arnett, 2004).

Possibility

Arnett (2004) states that the final characteristic of emerging adulthood is that it is the age of possibilities, when people have an unparalleled opportunity to transform their lives. Arnett (2004) believes that one feature of emerging adulthood that makes it the age of possibilities is that, typically, emerging adults have left their family of origin but are not yet committed to a new network of relationships and obligations. This is especially significant for young people who have grown up in unfriendly conditions. A chaotic or unhappy family impacts the development of children and adolescents, and they have to return to that family environment every day without choice. However, with emerging adulthood and departure from the family home, comes an unparalleled opportunity for young people to transform their lives, which may have many problems that developed in their original family.

Emerging adulthood in China

Emerging adulthood theory was developed in response to the contemporary changes related to youth in industrialized societies. Therefore, EA theory can be a better way to understand today's young people, and it is also found to be quite relevant to Chinese college students. In China, rapid economic and social development has been taking place since the early 1990s. In Chinese urban areas, people's lives have become similar to those in other industrialized societies. Also, as a result of globalization, there are more and more similarities between Chinese society and other industrialized societies in terms of youth culture. Like other young people, Chinese young people also tend to postpone their entry to adulthood (Nelson & Chen, 2007). Chinese college students may be influenced more by the globalization of youth culture because they may have better access to foreign cultures compared to their non-college peers (Nelson, Badger, & Wu, 2004). One study found that emerging adulthood does exist among Chinese college students, although it seems to be a shorter period (Badger, Nelson, and Barry, 2006). Therefore, EA theory is applicable to Chinese college students and provides a new way to understand them. The application of EA theory in this study may also contribute to its own development by providing the cross-cultural evidence of emerging adulthood.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) – A Guideline for Examining Autonomy

Definition of autonomy

The development of autonomy is considered a central developmental task, particularly in adolescence and emerging adulthood. Autonomy was defined as separation

or emotional independence from parents, self-regulation, self-control, decision-making abilities, and independence in terms of different aspects of functioning (Goossens, 2006; Silverberg & Gondoli, 1996; Steinberg, 1990). However, there is not a clear conceptualization of this construct (Beyers, Goossens, Vansant, & Moors, 2003; Hmel & Pincus, 2002; Soenens et al., 2007). Human development researchers tend to define autonomy as independence. From this perspective, an adolescent tries to gain independence by distancing himself/herself behaviorally and psychologically from his/her parents, and by taking on more responsibility for his/her own life (Levy-Warren, 1999). With such a conceptualization of autonomy, dependence on parents is viewed as the opposite of self-reliance and independence (Kins, Beyers, Soenens, & Vansteenkiste, 2009).

However, self-determination theory (SDT) goes deeper, defining autonomy by considering humans' basic psychological needs and well-being. Autonomy, according to SDT, is defined as the extent to which individuals behave according to self-endorsed and authentic values (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Highly autonomous individuals take actions fully based on their personal goals and values. The opposite of autonomy in SDT is not dependence but rather heteronomy (Vansteenkiste et al., 2005), which refers to enacting behavior that is controlled by external forces or by internal compulsions. It is obvious that although independence and volitional functioning are both concepts covered by the term "autonomy," they denote two distinct constructs. Thus, highly independent individuals do not necessarily function in a volitional way, and vice versa (Ryan et al., 2006).

Regulation of behavior

According to SDT, the regulation of behavior can be positioned along a continuum ranging from highly autonomous to highly controlled. The extreme high end of this continuum is *intrinsic motivation*, which is the ideal for autonomous behavior according to SDT. Those individuals who are intrinsically motivated are considered to be self-determined. The other side of the continuum is *extrinsic motivation*, in which individuals' behaviors are performed to meet external demands or rewards (Ryan & Deci, 2000), and are considered to be increasingly controlled and not autonomous. In SDT, *extrinsic motivation* is distinguished by the extent of its *internalization* (Ryan & Deci, 2000). *Internalization* has been defined in SDT as "the natural tendency to strive to integrate socially-valued regulations that are initially perceived as being external" (Koestner & Losier, 2002, p.101). The greater degree of internalization of extrinsic motivation and the incorporation of extrinsic motivation to a person's inner-self build a stronger foundation for autonomous activity (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Significance of autonomy

SDT proposes the concept of evolved psychological needs of human beings and their relation to psychological health and well-being. According to SDT, psychological well-being and optimal functioning is predicated on *autonomy, competence, and relatedness*. The theory argues that all three needs are essential, and that if any is thwarted there will be distinct functional costs (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Therefore, in SDT, autonomy is considered a basic psychological need for human beings and is closely related to people's well-being and optimal functioning (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In other

words, the more behaviors are regulated by autonomous, rather than controlled, motives, the more individuals will flourish and experience subjective well-being. This hypothesis has been confirmed in numerous domains, including education, prosocial behavior, and parenting (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Vansteenkiste, Ryan, & Deci, 2008). The results of some cross-cultural studies also support the argument that autonomy is a universal psychological need regardless of the values emphasized in one's culture (Vansteenkiste, Lens, Soenens, & Luyckx, 2006).

Summary and potential applicability of SDT in China

SDT is a well-known and credible theory, which offers a sound construction about human behaviors and the psychological motivations behind them. It not only provides a way to understand the relationship between human behavior and psychology, but also connects those understandings to broader issues such as essential psychological needs and the well-being of human beings. Through discussing concepts such as *internalization*, SDT offers a deeper understanding of autonomy, focusing on volitional functioning rather than psychological independence. In other words, SDT distinguishes autonomy from psychological independence. According to SDT, a psychologically independent person is not necessarily autonomous if his/her psychological independence is not from his/her own will.

In China, a collective society, autonomy may be very different from independence, which means that young people living with their parents seem to be dependent, but actually can be very autonomous, because they deeply internalize the traditional culture of family interdependence to a high degree. They choose to live with

their family and take on responsibilities towards other family members because of their personal values and goals, which have incorporated and integrated the traditional collective cultures. Thus, these young people would be considered dependent from the perspective of Western values but could actually be autonomous. SDT offers a way to avoid this issue by focusing on the psychological level of autonomy, making it an appropriate choice for the current study.

Autonomy in Emerging Adulthood – Connecting SDT with EA Theory

Autonomy, according to Arnett (2004), is a central aspect of self-focusing. Using self-focusing, Arnett (2004) tries to describe how emerging adults make decisions based on their personal goals and values. In the United States, most emerging adults leave home at 18 or 19, and moving out means that daily life is much more self-focused (Arnett, 2004). They have to make decisions on their own all the time, ranging from trivial to significant. Through this daily practice of decision-making, emerging adults develop skills for daily living, understand better who they are and what they want from life, and start to build a basis for their adult lives (Arnett, 2004). Therefore, Arnett (2004) believes that EA is a significant time to develop autonomy and independence in order for youth to enter adulthood. Gaining autonomy is not only a central developmental task for adolescents, but also a crucial milestone for emerging adults.

In his argument about self-focusing, Arnett (2004) discusses the issue of autonomy by examining youths' decision-making behaviors, which is also the focus of SDT. Decision-making is a behavior associated with almost every action in a person's life, and therefore is the best point from which to examine and understand people's

regulation of behaviors and autonomy. Hence, SDT and EA theory connect in that EA theory recognizes the significance of autonomy in emerging adulthood, while SDT provides a relatively accurate framework to explore the autonomy of emerging adults.

Chinese College Students and Autonomy

Autonomy in Emerging Adulthood

Individual autonomy has always been emphasized in Western culture, and the development of an independent, self-controlled, self-directed, and self-reliant child is viewed as the goal of all education (Gleitman, 1987; Hsu, 1981; Munroe & Munroe, 1975; Persell, 1984; Rohner & Pettengill, 1985). A child is supposed to eventually become a self-reliant adult with a high degree of independence (Sampson, 1977). Therefore, the fostering of autonomy has always been emphasized by parents, and children are encouraged to develop their autonomy from a young age in Western culture. In adolescence, autonomy is supposed to develop intensively and is considered a major developmental task. In America, after 18 years of age, a young person is usually starting his or her independent life and thought to be autonomous. Thus, there seems no serious conflict between parents and children in autonomy development in America, especially for children who are past the age of 18 (Kloep, 1999; Settersten, Furstenberg, & Rumbaut, 2005).

However, since the late 1980s, along with economic changes, a series of social trends have been taking place in America and other Western countries and having an impact on youth development. Changes in the American and global economy undermine stable, lifelong careers and replace them with careers with lower security, more frequent

job changes, and an ongoing need for new training and education (Smith, 2011). This social change in career contributes to other social trends including prolonged education and delayed marriage (Gitelson & McDermott, 2006). Interrelated with these trends, parents of today's youth seem increasingly willing to extend financial and other support to their children well into their 20s and even early 30s (Smith, 2011).

Accordingly, an overall trend of delayed home leaving has been observed in the West since the 1980s (Cherlin, Scabini, & Rossi, 1997; Galland, 1997; Goldscheider, 1997; Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1999; White, 2002). According to data from the 2000 U.S. Census, almost one-third of adult children lived with parents in their 20s (Lichter & Qian, 2004). In 1995, 58% of men aged 18 to 24 lived with their parents, as did 47% of similarly aged women (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004a). These shares of adult children (those over 18) living at home have increased 7% from 1995 and 2003, according to the Census Bureau's American Housing Survey (Hopkins, 2005). Data from the 2001 Survey of Income and Program Participation indicate that 19.9% of men ages 25 to 29 were residing in a parent's home, as were 13.5% of 25–29-year-old women (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005).

This trend is even more distinct in European countries, as correlated with cultural differences in expectations and traditions of young people leaving home and becoming independent (Kloep & Hendry, 2010). Hagell, Coleman, and Brooks (2013) report that the majority of young people between the ages of 18 and 24 in Britain are still living in their family, and this is comparable with most Northern European countries. In Southern Europe, this trend of delayed home leaving is even more pronounced (Cherlin, Scabini, & Rossi, 1997). Data from a large European panel study indicated that the latest home-

leaving patterns were found in Mediterranean countries, and particularly in Italy where half of women were found to start leaving home after age 27, and for nearly half of men, it did not happen until almost age 30 (Iacovou, 2001).

Today's young people are also more apt to return to live with their parents after leaving home for education or work (Aquilino, 2005; Kloep & Hendry, 2010). The possibility that U.S. young adults would return home for 4 months or more after having been away for at least that length of time increased from about 22% to almost 50% between the 1920s and the 1990s (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1994; White, 1994). As a result, biological children over the age of 18 accounted for more than one-fifth (22.6%) of coresident offspring in 2000, nearly as large a share as preschool-aged children (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004b).

These trends of youths' home leaving seem to be a result of economic and social changes in the last three decades, and also demonstrate that the entry into adulthood has become more ambiguous, gradual, and less uniform for today's young people (Settersten et al., 2005). It may imply that young people will face a number of challenges and difficulties in gaining the autonomy and independence needed for transitioning to adulthood. Arnett (2004) addresses the significance of these developmental tasks for young people in EA theory. Autonomy, according to Arnett (2004), is a central aspect of self-focusing, one of the five characteristics of EA discussed above. Arnett (2004) uses self-focusing to describe how emerging adults have to make decisions by themselves on a daily basis, and he believes that EA is a significant time to develop autonomy and independence in order for youth to enter their adulthood. Through daily practice of decision-making, emerging adults develop skills for daily living, understand better who

they are and what they want from life, and start to build a basis for their adult lives (Arnett, 2004).

Hence, the development of autonomy is a crucial milestone for emerging adults, and researchers have found that autonomy is significantly related to emerging adults' well-being (Kins, Beyers, Soenens, & Vansteenkiste, 2009). In one study, the majority of emerging adults who returned to live with their parents missed the freedom and autonomy they had gained while living away from parents, even while acknowledging the benefits that returning to the parental home yielded (Sassler, Ciambrone, & Benway, 2008). Kenyon and Koerner's (2009) study revealed that when parents and emerging adults disagree about an autonomy issue, it is often because the emerging adults want greater autonomy on that particular issue than parents feel ready to grant. However, Kenyon and Koerner (2009) also found that emerging adults in college tended to be more emotionally dependent on their parents than their parents were dependent on them, and that at the transition to college, middle-aged parents are emphasizing and anticipating a higher level of autonomy than their emerging-adult children. Kenyon and Koerner (2009) reported that college students were about 25% higher than parents in endorsing that it would be hard to leave parents after visiting and wishing their parents lived nearer. Students also reported that they wanted to spend most of their time with their parents when they were home on vacation. Some students even mentioned that they wanted less autonomy or more emotional support/attachment to parents.

Thus, research findings regarding emerging adults' expectations on their autonomy are inconsistent. A study examining separation-individuation for emerging adults found that the underlying dynamics of age, gender, and the role of parental figures

in the development of an autonomous sense of self seem to be similar amongst Western countries, at least for university students (Saraiva & Matos, 2012). Generally, most research on autonomy of emerging adults is centered on college students. Researchers believe that for emerging adults who go to college, it is a time of important transition in autonomy in their relationship with their parents; therefore, the transition to college is a key time period to study the autonomy process (Kenyon & Koerner, 2009). However, research on situation and challenges of autonomy development is still limited for emerging adults. More research is needed to help understand the inconsistent results regarding emerging adults' expectations on their autonomy, as well as to identify the correlates of their autonomy.

Autonomy in Chinese College Students

In Chinese culture, the expectation for autonomy in youth, especially in female youth, is significantly later than in Western culture (Fuligni, 1998). For most Chinese youths in urban areas, the intensive development of autonomy tends to start at emerging adulthood, when they enter college. As an important group of emerging adults, college students were not studied much in regard to the autonomy issue in either Western or Eastern cultures. In China, although most college students have relatively more opportunities to make decisions by themselves, the traditional culture, valuing parental authority, may still challenge the development of their autonomy (Hu, 2010; Liu, 2005; Ma, 2007). Li, Qiu, and Wang (2009) investigated the characteristics of Chinese college students' autonomy and its relation to social adjustment. Results showed that the male students' autonomy level was higher than the female students, and there were

significant correlations between autonomy and social adjustment. Students with higher autonomy had significantly better social adjustment than those with lower autonomy. This empirical study supports the assumption about the significance of autonomy on college students' psychological and social functions.

Regarding college students' decision-making style, Mau (2000) found that the dependent style was the second most likely style endorsed by Taiwanese students (32.0%) in making career decisions, yet it was the least likely to be endorsed by American students (10.7%). However, different findings have been reported: Yi and Park (2003) found that Asian college students did not necessarily employ more cooperative, collaborative or avoidant decision-making styles than North American college students. In sum, there is limited research about Chinese college students' autonomy, specifically, its contributing factors and relationship with students' psychosocial functions. More research needs to be conducted to get a more accurate understanding about Chinese college students' autonomy as well as how cultural and social factors influence students' autonomy development and decision-making.

Autonomy and Parental Involvement

According to SDT, an environment that supports healthy functioning ultimately supports the satisfaction of a person's basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2002). A social context that supports these basic needs in return supports a person's motivation, performance, and well-being. Situations that are autonomy-supportive have been regarded as those that provide options and support of a person's ideas and encourage a person's competence, all of which

endorse autonomous motivation (Gagne, 2003). Family environment and parenting style have been considered the most important social context impacting individuals' autonomy development and have been researched the most (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Specifically, autonomy-supportive versus controlling parenting is considered to be particularly important in fostering autonomous behavior regulation (Grolnick, Deci, & Ryan, 1997).

Parental autonomy support is defined as characteristic of parents who take an empathic stance toward their child, allow for choosing among options, encourage the children to make self-endorsed decisions, and offer explanations when possibilities are limited (Ryan, Deci, Grolnick, & La Guardia, 2006). Such a parenting style involves understanding the child's frame of reference, providing meaningful choices whenever possible, encouraging initiative and exploration (Deci, Eghrari, Patrick, & Leone, 1994; Grolnick, 2003). Conversely, controlling parents fail to consider their children's perspective and pressure their children into obedience through intrusive and manipulative means, such as guilt induction and love withdrawal (Assor, Roth, & Deci, 2004; Barber, 1996).

Much research has confirmed that autonomy-supportive parenting fosters autonomous motives for children's behavior, in contrast to controlling parenting (Ryan et al., 2006; Soenens et al., 2007). Moreover, autonomy-supportive parenting could contribute to a person's well-being, performance, and motivation according to SDT's assumption (Ryan & Deci, 2002). This idea was supported by Lekes, Gingras, Philippe, Koestner, and Fang's (2010) study, which found that autonomy-supportive parenting was associated with children's well-being through promoting intrinsic life goals. Other studies also demonstrate the significant role that autonomy-supportive parenting plays in a

child's perceived competence (Grolnick, Ryan, & Deci, 1991; Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997). Grolnick, Deci, and Ryan's (1997) study particularly indicated that autonomy-supportive parenting yields numerous benefits for adolescents' and emerging adults' adjustment. In contrast, controlling, pressuring, and manipulative parenting undermines adjustment and well-being of adolescents (Barber & Harmon, 2002).

However, there was little discussion about the relationship between types of social support from parents and autonomy-supportive parenting. In other words, we know little about whether autonomy-supportive parenting involves more of a specific type of social support from parents. There are different types of social support in terms of different aspects. However, *emotional support*, the offering of empathy, concern, affection, love, trust, acceptance, intimacy, encouragement, or caring (Langford, Bowsher, Maloney, & Lillis, 1997; Slevin et al., 1996), and *instrumental support,* the provision of financial assistance, material goods, or services (Heaney & Israel, 2008; House, 1981), are the two most significant types of social support. Researchers found that male and female adolescents were likely to demonstrate different preferences for certain types of social support. It was observed that emotional social support might be more helpful for girls' psychosocial well-being, while instrumental social support might work better with boys. (Choquet, Hassle, Morin, Falissard, & Chau, 2008; Wilson et al., 1999). However, little study was conducted about the impact of different types of social support on youths' autonomy development.

Parental Involvement in Emerging Adults' Autonomy Development

Emerging adulthood is a time when young people do not take on full adult responsibilities and keep away from various personal commitments, while exploring possible lifestyles. This requires sufficient support from parents, both emotional and material (Kloep & Hendry, 2010). How parents interact with their emerging adult children can either advance or hinder their development of autonomy and then the process into their adulthood. There are particular challenges to parent-child relationships during emerging adulthood, impacting the development of emerging adults' autonomy. It can be a difficult process for parents to recognize their emerging adult children's needs, which are associated with their development of autonomy. Further, it can be difficult for them to adjust to their new roles within family, particularly given that many emerging adults are still economically dependent on parents (Aquilino, 2006). Therefore, in addition to parents' adjustment to emerging adults' needs for autonomy and other adult transitions, emerging adults should be able to understand and deal with their parents' potential difficulty in adapting to and accepting changes as they transition to adulthood (Aquilino, 2006). This process requires much negotiation between parents and emerging adults and will likely entail tensions and conflicts.

Although studies on parent-child interactions have been particularly limited in emerging adulthood (Gitelson & McDermott, 2006; Ryff & Seltzer, 1996), preliminary ideas about parental involvement in emerging adults' autonomy development can be gleaned from existing literature. Research has shown that there are few conflicts surrounding issues of autonomy between emerging adults and their parents nowadays (Kloep, 1999; Settersten, Furstenberg, & Rumbaut, 2005), partly due to the fact that

struggles for control and power between parents and their children often occur in childhood and middle adolescence (John & Alwyn, 2005). According to Collins et al. (1997) and Kenyon and Koerner (2009), in transition from childhood to adolescence, parents' perceptions of how mature their children were and the freedom they granted them accordingly often clashed with children's own ideas of their ability to act like adults. Parents and adolescents hold different opinions about timing and significance of certain developmental transitions associated with adolescents' development of autonomy.

According to Fingerman (1996), parent-child conflicts are more likely the result of parents and children being at different stages of development, rather than both sides having different expectations about autonomy. Kenyon and Koerner (2009) found that there is a moderate correlation between parents' and college students' autonomy expectations, suggesting that parents and emerging adults hold similar expectations and tend not to hold completely divergent expectations about autonomous behaviors. Furthermore, it was found that on average, at the transition to college, middle-aged parents are emphasizing and anticipating a higher level of autonomy than their emerging-adult children (Kenyon & Koerner, 2009).

Although it seems that there are generally consistent expectations between parents and their emerging adult children on autonomy, problems and conflicts still exist in parent-child relationship, surrounding issues of autonomy. According to Kloep and Hendry's (2010) study, some parents tried with reluctance to accept their children's striving for autonomy, while others employed various strategies, whether consciously or unconsciously, to delay "letting go." Any striving for autonomy, which did not coincide with parental views, was often met with hostility and seen as a sign of immaturity (Kloep

& Hendry, 2010).

In sum, emerging adults' development of autonomy and separation-individuation from their parents is complex. Parents play a significant role in either promoting or hindering their emerging adult children's advancement of autonomy. Some studies revealed that autonomy-supportive reactions of parents may promote emerging adults' autonomy, because they neither need to fear rejection nor oppressing engulfment by parents, regardless of which direction they decide to take and regardless of whether their commitments turn out to be successful in the long run (Hauser et al., 1984; Luyckx et al., 2007). A few studies have also shown that autonomy-enhancing parenting styles facilitate individuation in emerging adults (Kins, Beyers, Soenens, & Vansteenkiste, 2009; Ryan, Deci, Grolnick, & La Guardia, 2006; Soenens, Vansteenkiste, Ltiyckx, & Goossens, 2006). Research also supports the notion that parents and emerging adults may need to talk more about autonomy issues, such as frequency of contact and rules when home on vacation, before the transition to college (Kenyon, & Koerner, 2009). However, more such research is needed, providing practical suggestions for a smooth renegotiation between emerging adults and their parents on autonomy.

Parental Involvement in Chinese College Students' Autonomy Development

Some cross-cultural studies have been conducted to examine children's autonomy development and their family relationships in collectivist backgrounds. Studies found that, although American adolescents from collectivist cultural backgrounds tended to be the least willing to openly contradict their parents and possessed the least expectations for

autonomy, these youths also indicated overall levels and developmental patterns of conflict and cohesion that reflected those of their peers from individualist cultures (Fuligni, 1998). Therefore, although previous studies have indicated that Asian Americans tend to be less autonomous, more dependent, and more conforming and obedient to authority (Abbot, 1970; Sue & Kirk, 1972), this feature has been changing greatly. It is suggested that, within a single society, cultural variations in beliefs about autonomy and authority may play only a modest role in parent-adolescent relationships (Fuligni, 1998).

However, in Chinese society, this issue can be more complex and conflicting. Traditional Chinese family life is characterized by order, authority, and clearly defined roles and responsibilities (Fong, 1968), and family members' life goals and achievements are expected to be geared toward family reputation (Yeung, 1982). Chinese parents strongly emphasize their children's obligations to the family (Sue, 1981). Children who act contrary to their parents' wishes are told that they are selfish and inconsiderate, that they do not show gratitude for what their parents have done for them, and that they make the family lose face (Yau & Smetana, 1996). Thus, the development of individual autonomy has been highly undervalued by parents. Yet, these traditional values have been changing dramatically due to rapid social change and globalization as discussed above. In Yau and Smetana's (1996, 2003) studies, Chinese adolescents reported that they desired more autonomy from parents in decision-making. For parent-child conflicts, Yau and Smetana (1996, 2003) found that Chinese adolescents primarily justified conflicts by appealing to personal jurisdiction, as has been found among American youth of varying ethnicities (Fuligni, 1998; Smetana, 1989; Smetana & Gaines, 1999). These

findings are consistent with other research indicating that Chinese in Mainland China, Singapore, and Hong Kong emphasize personal values such as freedom and personal achievement and that desires for freedom, independence, and individuality are prevalent among young Chinese (Lau, 1992; Yau & Smetana, 2003). Therefore, a more autonomy-supportive family environment and parenting style were required by young Chinese.

Along with the changing environment and increasing psychological problems among Chinese youth, especially college students, the traditional parenting style began to be queried and even blamed for mostly prohibiting students' development of autonomy, identity and other areas of psychological growth (Liu, 2005). Those families having only one child are blamed even more for spoiling and controlling their children (Hu, 2010). However, there is almost no research specifically exploring how parental involvement impacts college students' autonomy development, nor research exploring how this process influences parent-child relationship and students' psychological well-being in Chinese families.

Conclusion

The existing literature provides the rationale for my research question. According to some reports and empirical studies, autonomy seems to be a significant factor impacting Chinese college students' psychological well-being. This idea receives support from SDT and EA theory, which offer a framework for understanding the relationship between autonomy development and psychological well-being in college students. SDT further provides guidance in understanding the relationship between autonomy and parental influence. SDT draws much attention and interests from researchers, and its

assumptions about autonomy and autonomy's impact on psychological outcome have much empirical support. Accordingly, there is relatively strong evidence for the significance of autonomy in human's psychological well-being and the relationship between autonomy and parental influence.

However, the literature is limited in some respects. First, there is little empirical evidence on the impact of autonomy on Chinese college student's psychological well-being. Chinese researchers assume autonomy is a significant contributing factor to college students' psychological difficulties, but this is based on limited empirical studies in China and related research from other countries. Second, since EA theory is newly established, there is little empirical support for its assumptions. For instance, few studies specifically explore EA theory's self-focusing feature in emerging adults. Further research is needed to justify the assertion of the role of autonomy as a major developmental task for college students, an important group of emerging adults.

Research Questions

Based on the above literature review and exploration of self-determination theory and emerging adulthood theory, the following research questions were developed for the current study: 1) What does the process of the autonomy development look like for Chinese college students? 2) How do parents influence students' autonomy development? 3) How is Chinese college students' psychosocial well-being related to their autonomy development?

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter includes a discussion of the following major areas: (a) research paradigms, (b) research design, (c) research participants, (d) data collection and sources of data, (e) data analysis and interpretation, (f) use of self in research, (g) criteria for ensuring credibility and trustworthiness of the study, and (h) strengths and limitations of the study. The first section of the chapter, Research Paradigms, discusses the basic paradigms, constructivist and postpositivism, which guide the study. The section Research Design provides a description and rationale for choosing qualitative research, and offers justification for the selection of a grounded theory approach for the study. The research participants section will address the participant sample and recruitment process as well as ethical considerations. The Data Collection and sources of data section covers the study's data sources and procedures. The Data Analysis and Interpretation section gives a detailed description of the data analysis and interpretation processes. Under the use of self, the researcher's position will be discussed. Following a discussion of criteria for ensuring trustworthiness of the study, the final section of this chapter addresses the study's strengths and limitations.

Research Paradigms

A research paradigm is a set of basic beliefs that a researcher holds concerning the nature of the world (Linclon & Guba, 1985). Two research paradigms, constructivism and postpositivism, guided this study and informed the selection of the research approaches. Constructivists believe that reality is constructed; it is socially and contextually specific as well as locally based (Linclon & Guba, 1985, 1994a, 1994b). Constructivist researchers, therefore, seek to develop an understanding of meanings people make out of their experiences. Little is known about Chinese college students' perceptions on their development of autonomy and their relationships with parents in the process of developing autonomy. Thus, the constructivist research paradigm helped in understanding the meanings Chinese college students make out of their experiences related to autonomy development, in a society transitioning in culture, economy, and social systems.

Postpositivism, another paradigm used by this study, guided how the data were processed to generate understanding. While positivists assert that the natural and social worlds can be understood through application of scientific method and hold a clear set of beliefs towards the world and the nature of knowing, postpositivists reject these beliefs and challenge everything the positivists assume to be true (O'Leary, 2007). Postpositivists believe the world is not knowable or predictable, but rather vague, extremely complex, variable and open to interpretation (O'Leary, 2007). Postpositivism's openness to interpretation provides consistency with constructivism. Postpositivism, however, also emphasizes use of systematic and scientific methods in knowing the world, like positivism.

Under these two paradigms, a grounded theory approach was selected to basically direct the data analysis. According to Charmaz (2003), a grounded theory approach contains both positivistic and interpretive elements. With regard to the specific procedures and techniques of data analysis and assessment, the study followed Strauss and Corbin's (1990) strategies such as open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, which demonstrate the positivistic tradition by emphasizing a systematic approach and validation criteria. However, fundamentally, the study explored how people construct actions, meanings, and intentions following an interpretive tradition of a grounded theory approach, consistent with constructivism (Charmaz, 2003).

Research Design

Rationale for the Use of Qualitative Research

Given that few studies had been done on this topic, as well as that the investigator hoped to contribute to the development of the theories employed in the examination and also inform future quantitative research, grounded theory, a qualitative method, was selected to examine this topic. Although there were several widely used scales measuring autonomy and parent-child relationship (Grolnick, Deci, & Ryan, 1997; Niemiec et al., 2006; Sheldon, 1995; Sheldon, Ryan, & Reis, 1996), which might serve as measures for a quantitative study, it still seemed legitimate to use qualitative methods for this study, since all those scales were developed and used in Western culture and their cross-cultural applicability remained unknown.

Grounded Theory Approach

The most important feature of grounded theory research is to develop theories that are directly "grounded" in the data from which it was derived (Charmaz, 2003; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Glaser (1992) stated, "Grounded theory renders as faithfully as possible a theory discovered in the data which explains the subjects' main concerns and how they are processed" (p.14). Grounded theory methodology was initially developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Glaser and Strauss (1967) later differed in their approach to grounded theory, mainly in the areas of data analysis and the role of the researcher. Strauss and Corbin (1990) favored open, axial, and selective coding methods, while Glaser (1992) emphasized a looser process of data analysis, which used only open and selective coding procedures or allowed concepts and theoretical understandings to arise directly from the data (Glaser, 1992). Furthermore, Glaser emphasized a more passive and unbiased role for the researcher, whereas Strauss viewed the researcher as more active and participatory (Strauss & Corbin, 1994).

Grounded theory continued to evolve through many researchers' contributions. Despite the variance in approaches, grounded theory remains a way of thinking about data and a process of conceptualizing from data. Charmaz (2003) summarized the essential elements of an updated grounded theory method as follows:

> a) simultaneous process of data collection and analysis, b) an inductive approach that leads to a conceptual understanding of the data, c) pursuit of emergent themes early in the data analysis, d) flexible strategies for data collection and analysis, e) discovery of basic social processes within the data, f) sampling procedures that are driven by constant comparative analysis, and g) integration of categories into theoretical frameworks. (p. 311-313)

With regard to the specific strategies of data analysis, there are many different

ideas associated with different approaches to grounded theory. The most influential way of data analysis, as developed by Strauss and Corbin (1990), contains open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990, p.12), "open coding is the interpretive process by which data are broken down analytically. Its purpose is to give the analyst new insights by breaking through standard ways of thinking about or interpreting phenomena reflected in the data." Thus, in open coding, usually each word, line or segment would be coded. In axial coding, Strauss and Corbin (1990, p.13) stated, "categories are related to their sub-categories, and the relationships tested against data. Further development of categories takes place and one continues to look for indications of them." Thus, the coded statements are compared to find common themes and relationships in axial coding. Finally, "selective coding is the process by which all categories are unified around a 'core' category, and categories that need further explication are filled in with descriptive detail." (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p.14) Therefore, in selective coding, the initially categorized codes continue to be sorted, integrated, and organized into more conceptual codes.

Using grounded theory in this study

Grounded theory methodology is "particularly appropriate for studies seeking new theoretical explanations built on previous knowledge to explain variances in the field" (Grbich, 2007, p.70). An important purpose of the study was to examine the applicability of the theories the author employs in a new population, and pursue new theoretical explanations of my topic to promote the development of those theories. Hence, a grounded theory approach would fit this study's purpose. Moreover,

contemporary grounded theory is considered a highly flexible and adaptable research methodology, which indicated that it could be adapted into the research questions, context, and population easily (Charmaz, 2003). In addition, the creative and inductive nature of grounded theory methodology provided enough room for the author to interpret data and apply insights (Charmaz, 2003), which was very helpful given that little was known about the research topic.

In-depth Interview

In-depth interviewing is one of the main methods that qualitative researchers use to collect data. Kahn and Cannell (1957) describe interviewing as "a conversation with a purpose" (p. 149). Interviewing varies in terms of "a presumptive structure and in the latitude the interviewee has in responding to questions" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 101). Patton (2002, p. 341-347) proposed three general categories of interviews: "the informal, conversational interview"; "the general interview guide approach"; and "the standardized, open-ended interview." In-depth interviews in a qualitative study typically are more like "conversations than formal events with predetermined response structures" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 101). Qualitative researchers explore a few general topics in in-depth interviews to uncover participants' views but meanwhile respect how participants structure the responses (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Thus, this method is based on an assumption essential to qualitative research: Participants' perspectives on a topic of study should be expressed in ways participants view it, not how researchers view the topic (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). In addition, "a degree of systematization in questioning" may be required depending on purpose and phase of data collection

(Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 101).

In-depth interviewing was particularly suitable for this exploratory study, since little was known about Chinese college students' development of autonomy, especially students' own perceptions of their autonomy and parental involvement. In-depth interviewing helped to gain understandings about Chinese college students' perceptions and experiences related to the development of autonomy as well as how their parents function in that process. Since the study itself had specific research questions, there were guiding questions for all in-depth interviews (see section on Data Collection below), making sure that a focused and relevant direction would be followed in interviews. However, this guideline did not restrict ways participants expressed or organized their ideas, and all interviews were conversational.

Research Participants

The inclusion criteria for study participants included 1) aged between 18 and 29 and 2) attending college. Thirty participants were recruited to reach data saturation, but 4 participants were excluded from data analysis because they were from 3-year colleges and had different experiences of developing autonomy in comparison to the rest of the participants. Given that the relationship between students' autonomy development and their socioeconomic characteristics was not clear, the investigator recruited participants with diverse socioeconomic status. In the research literature, gender, and age – the latter indicated by being in different stages of college education – have been considered as important demographic variables in studying Chinese college students' psychosocial issues (Ma, 2007; Zhang, 2010; Zhao, Xu, & Li, 2006). College major is another

important variable possibly related to college students' psychosocial health (Yin, Yu, & Song, 2010; Zhao, Xu, & Li, 2006). In addition, Chinese college students from urban and rural areas were found to have different traditions and habits that might impact their psychosocial health (Yin, Yu, & Song, 2010). Therefore, for the current study, a balance in these demographic and socioeconomic characteristics – including gender (male/female), major (science/art), stage in college education (undergraduate/graduate), and home place (urban/rural) – were taken into account in recruitment.

The participants were recruited from seven different universities in Beijing and one university in Britain. Dr. Guoxiu Tian, a professor at Capital Normal University as well as a member of the researcher's dissertation committee, helped recruit participants. She made announcements in class and sent out emails to her students in those universities, advertising the study. All participants were recruited in June 2013. Each participant received the equivalent of 8 U.S. dollars in cash as compensation for participating in the interview. The issues during the recruitment were discussed between the investigator and her mentor, Dr. Yi, to make sure that the inclusion criteria and diversity principle were followed.

The study followed the ethical standards for human subject research provided by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of Utah. Participants were told that participation in the research was voluntary, and also were informed about the confidentiality of the study. They were told that information received from them would be kept confidential and no one else could have access to the study data except the researchers of the study project. All the data were stored on the investigator's private computer, and the investigator was the only one with password access to the computer.

Only aggregate results of the study were shared and discussed in the research proceedings. All study participants were adults age 18 and older, and there was minimum risk for participation in the study. Participants were informed that all audiotapes and other identifying information would be destroyed after the dissertation was completed.

Data Collection

Semistructured in-depth interviews were conducted by the investigator in Chinese. Each interview was about 1 hour, and participants were asked about their decision-making experience and their parents' role in that process. The guiding questions included:

- How do you usually make major decisions, such as relationship, career, or major?
- How about other daily decisions?
- Who do you consult with to help you make these decisions?
- How would you describe your parents' role in your decision-making process?
- If you did not follow their opinions, what would happen?
- How do you feel in your decision-making process?
- How do you cope with that feeling? How does this whole process influence your social relationship?

All the interviews were recorded into audio files and transcribed into Chinese by the investigator. A reflective memo was kept throughout the process of data collection by the investigator. The ideas and issues in the memo were discussed between the investigator and her mentor, Dr. Yi, to uncover and address possible biases and related ethical issues, and also to ensure that proper and sufficient information was obtained from

the participants.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Grounded Theory Approach of Data Analysis

Following the procedures and strategies of grounded theory developed by Strauss and Corbin (1990) as described above, the data were analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding. Reflective memos were kept throughout the entire process of coding. In the open coding phase, the investigator read the transcripts repeatedly to get a sense of the main topics mentioned by participants for their autonomy development. Then the investigator coded each line or segment (depending on the content) based on her knowledge and experience. A large number of codes were generated and were all related to the experiences, opinions, or feelings of participants on autonomy development, as well as their parents' involvement and role in their development of autonomy.

In axial coding, the coded statements were compared across participants to find common themes and relationships. A number of subthemes, such as study-centered life before college, parent-child conflicts regarding decision-making, independent decision-making during college, parental influence on decision-making and so on, emerged in this phase. In selective coding, those subthemes continued to be sorted, integrated, and organized into more conceptual themes, which became the main themes, such as the process of participants' autonomy development, parental support on autonomy development, and the change of parents' attitude towards autonomy development.

The investigator discussed with her mentor the process of data analysis, including how the themes were developed and what the main findings were, allowing for peer

review of the data analysis and improvement of trustworthiness of the study. Given that emerging adulthood (EA) theory and self-determination theory (SDT) offered definitions on autonomy and other related constructs, as well as a basic framework among those concepts they provided more guidance in interpreting the results later.

Use of Self in Research

Given the nature of the study and her personal background, the investigator considered herself as an insider. There were benefits of being an insider in the study: the communications between the investigator and participants were easy; the investigator could better understand participants' experiences, benefiting the data analysis and interpretation. However, there was also the potential of bias associated with being an insider, which may impact the data collection and analysis. As an insider, the investigator knew a number of issues related to the topic from her own experience and observations of others. That knowledge might have caused her to overlook or neglect the experiences that were distinct from her expectations. The investigator used several strategies, such as field notes and reflection memos, to make herself more aware of possible biases to decrease their impact on the study.

Criteria for Ensuring Credibility and Trustworthiness of the Study

Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed four constructs to measure or consider trustworthiness of qualitative studies. The first construct is *credibility*, which aims to ensure that a studied subject is appropriately identified and described (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). To address the credibility of the current study, the

strategy of member checking was used to enhance the study's trustworthiness. A few participants were invited to review the manuscripts of their interviews and comment on the accuracy of emerging themes. The second construct is *transferability*, in which researchers should argue that their findings would be useful to others in similar situations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), addressing the external validity of a study. Considering this standard, two theoretical perspectives were used to evaluate and interpret study data, enhancing the thoroughness of data interpretation. Thus, the transferability of the study was increased through linking the study results to two theories (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

The third construct is *dependability*, in which researchers try to account for changing conditions in the phenomenon selected for research and changes in the design caused by an increasingly refined understanding of the situation (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Consistent with this construct, one research paradigm of the study was constructivism, which claims that the social world is always being constructed and changing. Thus, guided by constructivist ideology, the investigator was open-minded to any emerging themes in data analysis or data collection.

The forth construct, *confirmability*, addresses the traditional concept of objectivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). It is emphasized that researchers should ask whether the findings of the study can be confirmed by another (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Therefore, the strategy of peer debriefing was applied to meet this construct. It is important for researchers to work with one or several colleagues who hold impartial views of the study, and that these impartial peers examine the researcher's transcripts, final report, and/or general methodology, and then provide feedback. As

noted above, the investigator discussed how she developed themes from the data with her mentor. Such peer review helped to enhance credibility and ensure the validity of the study. Additionally, reflective memos were kept throughout the study to bracket the investigator's preconceptions and judgment from the experiences and perceptions of participants, thus ensuring a more accurate interpretation and understanding of the data.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

As part of a larger cross-cultural study, the current study contributes to understanding college students' autonomy development in a cross-cultural context. This exploratory study also provides a base for future research, given that little was known on this topic. Particularly, the study can inform the modification of existing scales or the creation of new scales for future quantitative research on youth autonomy. In addition, the study can help in examining the cross-cultural applicability of the two theories, EA theory and SDT, which were generated in American culture and applied to a new culture in this study. The development of the two theories can be advanced accordingly.

However, this qualitative study is limited in external validity. In other words, it may not be legitimate to generalize the study results to other populations, although two theories were employed to ensure a connection between the study to more generalizable theories and concepts (see the section above, "Criteria for Ensuring Credibility and Trustworthiness of the Study"). In addition, there were potential limitations with the study methodology. As explained earlier, the grounded theory method has several distinct approaches, each with its own perspective regarding data analysis and other issues (Charmaz, 2003). There are many debates regarding these approaches, and there is no one

way of employing grounded theory (Charmaz, 2003). For example, Glaser (1992) criticized Strauss and Corbin's (1990) focus on axial coding as too fragmented and claimed that this process forced a presumed conceptual framework on the data. To address this issue, the investigator paid attention to the possible problem of fragmenting the naturally connected themes or making improper connections across different themes in the process of doing axial coding. Finally, the researcher's insider status and the potential for bias that comes with it were possible study limitations. However, as mentioned above, steps were taken (e.g., peer review, reflective memo) to addresses this issue and help ensure the study's credibility and trustworthiness.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

"If I have kids one day, I will help them make decisions for their own things, a lesson learned from my own experience." (H, male, 24) "I think parents need to let it go and do not involve themselves much in our career decisions. We should have our own thoughts. Even if we make wrong decisions and fail, let us fail because we may find a right way after that." (L, female, 22)

Introduction

This chapter discusses the results of the study. Five major areas will be presented: a) participants' demographic information, b) the process of autonomy development of the participants, c) parental influence on autonomy development, d) participants' mental health situation in developing autonomy, and e) different outcomes of autonomy development across demographic features. The chapter describes how Chinese college students may develop their autonomy as well as how the parents may involve themselves in their children's development of autonomy.

Participants' Demographic Information

Twenty-six participants were interviewed, and they were relatively balanced in terms of demographic characteristics. There were 11 males and 15 females. Most participants were aged from 19-25, and only 1 participant was 27 years old. Six participants were juniors in college, and 6 participants were graduate students. The other 14 participants were seniors in college. Regarding rural/urban resident status, 10 participants were rural residents while 16 were urban residents. Eighteen participants were the only child in their families, and 8 participants had at least one sibling. Participants were from seven different universities in Beijing, including Capital Normal University, China Youth University for Political Sciences, Capital University of Economics and Business, Beijing Institute of Technology, Beijing Technology and Business University, Beijing Finance and Trade College, and China University of Geosciences. One participant was studying at the University of Glasgow, a British university. The majors of the participants varied from science and engineering subjects, such as mathematics, computer science, and microelectronics, to social and human science subjects, such as social work, psychology, economics, marketing, and history.

The Process of Autonomy Development Among Chinese College Students

A generally delayed development of autonomy in the participants was found in comparison with youth in the West. Study results revealed three main stages in the autonomy development of the participants: The first stage was the *underdevelopment of autonomy* before college, in which participants depended on their parents for making

most decisions before entering college. The second stage was the start of a rapid development of autonomy. In between high school and college was a *turning point of autonomy development*, namely the college entrance examination, when the youth began participating in making major decisions for themselves. However, the third stage, an *intensive development of autonomy*, took place in college for most participants. In the entire process, parents played a significant role in either supporting or preventing the participants' autonomy development.

Stage 1: Underdevelopment of Autonomy Before College

Most participants mentioned that they were highly dependent on their parents in making decisions, including major and daily decisions, before entering college. According to their reports, parents basically took charge of everything in their lives, and they were used to following along: "They [my parents] were involved a lot in making decisions for me when I am young. From elementary to high school, I was really a child and they made all the decisions for me. I just followed their opinions."

Particularly, it was found that what parents were involved in most were students' academic decisions: "Before high school, they [my parents] arranged almost everything for me, especially decisions related to study." Chinese parents emphasize their children's academic success and tend to believe that it is the only way for their children to be successful in the future. All participants reported that their parents took control of various decisions related to their academic performance, such as choosing middle and high schools, selecting afterschool classes for catching up with schoolwork, or for polishing academic performance, and deciding to study either science or liberal arts in high school.

> They [my parents] were involved a lot in decisions like which middle school I should go, which subject I should put more effort into, and which area I need to study more. When I lacked confidence and hesitated to participate in some contests such as a math contest, they always encouraged me to try.

Besides the academic decisions, according to the participants, there were hardly any other important decisions to make in their lives before college. Their lives were simply centered around study before college: "There were not many decisions I need to make and consider. What I need to do is studying." In China, the college entrance examination is nationwide and extremely competitive. Twelve years of elementary and secondary education prepare students for this examination. A student's score on the college entrance examination determines whether he or she pursues a 3-year college or a 4-year university degree or if he or she can enter a high-ranked university. As a result of this educational system, students and even their families endure great pressure preparing for college entrance examinations. Therefore, students are always encouraged to focus on academics during their elementary and secondary education, particularly in high school, in order to enter a decent university. Accordingly, students cannot afford to waste time on part-time jobs, traveling, social life, and even romantic relationships before college. They have few opportunities to make decisions on those issues or areas of life.

> I cannot think of many decisions that I had to make as I grew up. Before college, the biggest concern was my academic performance. My parents value academic success very much. Due to their influence, I feel it's very reasonable and natural to do well in academics.

> I did not actually need to choose anything. It was arranged by my family that I left my home village and went to the best elementary school, the best middle and high schools in the town.

Despite the tedious and restrained lives centering on study, the participants reported only mild conflicts with parents in making decisions. Participants demonstrated

a general acceptance about following parents' or family members' opinions on their decisions, particularly related to their study or career: "I think it was good to have my parents make decisions for me before high school because I was not mature before college." They only reported having conflicts with their parents on daily decisions; however, they believed that those conflicts were forgettable and never impacted their relationship with parents:

> When I was little, I was kind of rebellious and disliked them making decisions for me. For example, I hated the things, like clothes, my mom bought for me, and I wanted to buy things by myself. But they thought I should pay attention to study rather than clothes or something. Then we often argued about those things. But it did not impact our relationship, and they are fun to recall now.

Stage 2: Choosing a College Major – A Turning Point of Autonomy Development

In China, after the college entrance examination, students need to choose a major before starting their undergraduate study. According to the participants, students could not easily transfer to other majors once they decided upon one, since the Chinese higher education system was strict and not open to students' changes of major. Thus, in most participants' and their families' opinions, choosing college majors could determine their future careers. Although Chinese society is becoming more dynamic, it seems that people still have low tolerance towards career changes. It is ideal for a Chinese student to select the right major and get a relevant job after graduation. Therefore, choosing a major for college is crucial and stressful for students and their families.

Furthermore, choosing a college major tended to be a turning point for the participants' development of autonomy. On one hand, parental involvement in decision-

making probably reached the highest level at this time, since it was such a significant decision for the entire family: “My parents never forced me to do anything, such as taking any afterschool courses, but they became so unsupportive and pressured me to follow their ideas while choosing a college major, making me so sad and helpless.” After selection of a major, parental involvement started to decrease. On the other hand, the participants’ involvement in their own decision-making seemed to begin at this point and continue to expand afterwards.

Leading up to the selection of a major, participants began to be confused and anxious when considering their parents’ opinions and their own ideas, which were still vague and underdeveloped. Although they participated in selecting a college and major, their final decisions were still derived from the opinions of their parents, instructors, or educated relatives, since they were not prepared for making such a major decision:

> My families helped me choose my major. I was not sure about what to choose at that time, and my uncle, a principal of a high school, consulted with someone about which school and major would be good for me. Their opinions took more than 50% in determining the major at that time, since I did not know much. If now I could choose my major again, my own opinion would take 80% for sure. I was young and knew nothing but study, so I had to follow their suggestions.
>
> My aunt helped me decide my major. She believed the major of social administration should have good prospects. I thought so and chose this major.
>
> I didn’t choose accounting. My parents did. I wanted to study psychology, but my parents thought it would be hard to get a job with a psychology major.
>
> Although I insisted on choosing this college, the idea was from an instructor in my high school. She said this college was good, so I was determined to enter this college. My parents did not provide suggestions since they did not know much about colleges and majors.

The participants expressed feelings of regret and frustration about having to follow other people's opinions on their careers instead of their own career interests: "I was supposed to choose a major that I like, but I did not consider much about my interest. I chose the major which I was told had good opportunities for employment." In addition, most participants expressed their feelings of being unready and unaware regarding the choice of a college and a major, which likely was the first significant choice in their lives: "I was interested in law in high school, but I was not sure if that was really what I wanted. I really didn't know. So I communicated with my sister, listened to her opinions, and finally chose science." Participants had been dependent on their parents for decision-making before the college entrance examination. Therefore, lack of experience with decision-making made them feel anxious and unprepared in facing such an important choice. One participant poignantly expressed the stress and frustration surrounding the choice of a college major: "I studied 12 years but only have 12 days to choose what I would do for the rest of my life."

Many participants were influenced by their parents in this decision. However, a few participants reported that they followed the opinions of their educated relatives or instructors rather than their parents, since their parents did not have much education and could not provide them with good advice. It was clear that selecting a college and a major was so crucial for the participants and their parents that they would seek support from various resources as needed:

> Speaking of choosing my major after the college entrance examination, I was very silly and had no idea at all. I basically followed my brother's suggestion for choosing a major. My only thought was that I wanted to go to a college out of my home province and experience the wonderful world out there.

Some participants, especially ones from rural areas, reported that lack of information prevented them from making decisions for their majors. They said that they had limited access to information on different majors and colleges at the time when the Internet was not as popular as it is today: "When I had to choose a major after the college entrance examination, I knew little about different majors. At that time, I had no Internet at home and no other ways to get information about majors."

Stage 3: Intensive Development of Autonomy in College

Participants tended to have a strong desire for autonomy after entering college. Most had been actively practicing decision-making in college, and the decisions included both daily and major ones, from choosing clothes to deciding on a career path and a romantic partner: "Until high school, most of my decisions were made by my parents. After high school, I began to discuss with them and made decisions together. My opinions usually took at least 50% in deciding something." All participants indicated that their own interests became the top factor to consider in making decisions:

> Before high school, my parents basically took control of my life, and they were involved a lot in making decisions related to my study. After high school, they were also participating in my decision-making, but I became the one making final decisions. They respect my ideas and choices.

Participants demonstrated more autonomy on decisions related to romantic relationships than on careers. They were more likely to consider parents' suggestions on career-related decisions while insisting on their own opinions for choosing a romantic partner. Parents tended to provide many criteria or ideas for participants to choose future partners, yet participants believed that those criteria were not necessary or even proper.

> I have different ideas [on choosing my romantic partner]. I care about my mom's thoughts, but I really don't want to follow her ideas. She wants me to choose someone who is the only child in her family and from the same place as me. However, I plan to get a job in Beijing, then why would I care about the original place that my future partner come from.

In this stage, participants did consult with other people for decision-making. Instead of consulting with their parents, participants tended to confer with their instructors, peers, and educated relatives when making major decisions, particularly career-related decisions. Their avoidance of consulting with parents probably was because participants really wanted to not be influenced by their parents in order to explore and develop their autonomy: "I would go talk to my friends, my boyfriend, or anyone but my parents. If I talk to my parents for suggestions, they would give me so much information. Those ideas can restrict my own thoughts." Another possible reason was that the parents might have too limited knowledge or resources to help:

> I made some important decisions such as applying for graduate school on my own. But I consulted with other people, including my instructors, my cousin and relatives, for those decisions. After all, they are experienced and know much more than me on career development.

Autonomy Development After College

It was observed that older participants, who were seniors in college or were in graduate school, tended to consider their parents' opinions more in making decisions: "As I grow older, I consider my parents' suggestions more since they have more life experiences, after all." The older participants seemed willing to discuss with their parents and incorporate their opinions and concerns:

> I was very disobedient in high school and the first 2 years of college, but now I can understand my parents' thoughts. What they want are all for my

> best. We need to be more patient and considerate when communicating with parents.

It seems that participants' consideration of their parents' opinions in decision-making grow like a parabola from before-college to after-college. Participants used to consider and follow their parents' suggestions to a large extent before high school, and they gradually considered their parents' opinions less as they were close to entering college. In college, participants tried to make decisions on their own and focus on their own interests without much consideration for their parents' ideas. After college, however, participants were more likely to take their parents' suggestions into account.

One participant mentioned his ideas on taking responsibilities and considering parents' and families' needs: "I believe that a person cannot live only for himself. First, he should consider the parents and the whole family and try to live for them. Then he can think about what to do for the society." Another participant expressed a similar opinion: "It cost a lot for our parents to bring up us. It's too selfish not to consider their opinions." These statements offer insight on why participants tend to consider their parents' opinions more as they grow older.

Parental Influence on Autonomy Development

Parental influence on autonomy development was discussed most frequently by participants. Parents involved themselves most in decisions related to participants' study and career. Furthermore, somewhat analogous to the process of participants' autonomy development, parents' attitudes towards their children's autonomy development were found to be changing during the transition from high school to college. This change of attitude seems to be crucial for participants' autonomy development. With regard to

parental support for participants' autonomy development, two types of support – instrumental and emotional, as discussed below – were identified and are found to have significant impact on the outcome of participants' autonomy development.

Change in Parents' Attitudes Towards Children's Autonomy Development

Before high school, participants had to adhere to their parents' opinions in making decisions, especially decisions related to their academic performance: "Our parents want us to be obedient. If you don't follow their opinions, you are not a good kid and there will be arguments and conflicts." Participants reported that their parents sometimes pressured them to follow their ideas:

> If I made my own decision and got an undesired result, my father would say 'See? I told you to follow my suggestions.' It's really a lot of pressure. My father always said 'make your own decisions,' but he would drop me a hint about his opinions and expect me to follow, making me very frustrated.

However, after high school, it seemed that parents tended to grant their children more and more freedom in making decisions. This was surprisingly universal across most participants' families. Although parents still provided their children with suggestions in major decisions, such as choosing a career and a romantic partner, they were willing to let the children make the final choice. Most participants claimed that their parents' opinions were not a significant factor to consider in their decision-making.

> When I was young, my parents arranged my life. They basically made all kinds of decisions for me from elementary to high school, and I just followed their choices. When I entered college, my parents started to let me make decisions and take control of my life. They even allowed me to choose a college and major on my own because they believed that it was time for me to make my own choices.

> After I entered college, my parents became very supportive with my own choices and rarely interfered in my decisions.

A few participants also stated that their parents tended to treat them more equally when they were in between high school and college. According to the report, their relationship with parents started to become closer and more equal, and they were more likely to share thoughts and feelings with their parents, because of the parents' change of attitude.

> In middle school, the relationship between my father and me was still very traditional and strict, but from high school on, my father changed a lot. We started to write letters to each other, and I found we became so close. We might not talk much by phone, but we enjoyed communicating through letters. My father influenced me a lot on my life attitude.

It was a significant change for parents from pressuring their children to follow their opinions to encouraging them to make their own decisions. Participants thus had great opportunities to make decisions and develop autonomy in college. The change in parents' attitude provided a foundation for participants' intensive development of autonomy in college.

However, not all parents made that change smoothly. In more traditional families, parents might not realize their children's needs for autonomy or not be ready to grant children more autonomy. Parents expected participants to follow their ideas in decision-making as they did before college, while participants were ready to gain more autonomy and make their own decisions. Thus, tensions and conflicts regarding decision-making between parents and children seemed to increase:

> After I entered college, my parents and I had more conflicts, because I started to have my own thoughts and opinions towards things. When we had different ideas on something or decisions, we always argued. Sometimes I just tried to offer my suggestions about some family issues, and that would also lead to a lot of arguments.

The conflicts were particularly serious when it came to deciding participants' major, career, and romantic partner. Participants' and their parents' perspectives were too different in terms of what was the best option for education, career, and marriage.

> We [my parents and I] had conflicts regarding making decisions sometimes. When I was choosing a college and a major, we had arguments and conflicts. Now I am in college, and we also argue a lot. For instance, I like to participate in many activities and did not pay much attention to the courses. My parents were very unsatisfied with that, although they do not show their frustration strongly. Another conflict is that we have different opinions towards my education and future career development. They think my opinions are one-sided, and I believe their thoughts are too out of date.

> I had a lot of unpleasant experiences with my parents in making decisions, such as choosing a college and major after the college entrance examination, choosing a romantic partner, and things like that. For example, my girlfriend and I keep a long distance relationship. She is in Lanzhou, and I am in Beijing. My parents believe that a long distance relationship would bring too much trouble to my life, and there will be many conflicts when I have to choose a place to work and settle down. But I insisted on my choice.

In addition, parents tended to be more protective of female participants and involved themselves more in their daughters' decision-making, making students feel overprotected. A female student reported that her parents tended to set up a range and only allow her to make decisions within the range. Also, parents tended to involve themselves particularly in decisions related to students' safety. The overprotection from parents seemed to prevent female participants from exploring decision-making and becoming autonomous:

> My father has been protective of me all the time and doesn't even let me travel. Last year I went to Xiamen with my best friends, and I had to ask for his permission 6 months before our trip. He did not approve my trip at first, and he finally agreed after buying me a good travel insurance.

> I have wanted to learn how to drive since my first year in undergraduate study. Now I am in the third year of graduate school and am still thinking of learning to drive. My father really doesn't want me to drive because he

> thinks driving can be dangerous. Recently, he finally allowed me to go to driving school but changed his mind again. I feel very mad that I waited for so long and got disappointed again. We had a big argument and did not talk to each other for 3 days.

Parental Support of Children's Autonomy Development

With the change of attitude towards participants' autonomy development, parents started providing support to their children for their decision-making, accelerating their exploration of autonomy. Based on participant responses, parents tended to provide two types of support: instrumental and emotional.

Instrumental support

For instrumental support, a few participants mentioned that their parents always offered advice, guidance, suggestions, or useful information to them while they were making decisions, especially major decisions related to their career and marriage. The information offered by the parents could be helpful in terms of informing the participants of options, particularly when they felt lost and helpless in making decisions:

> When I was taking the civil service examination, I traveled a lot and my mom almost kept me company all the time. During that time, I felt confused about my future, and my mom gave me a lot of suggestions, comforting me greatly.

A few participants demonstrated the need for instrumental support. They reported feeling helpless making decisions on their own and hoped to have someone to consult for suggestions and information. Their parents usually had limited education and were not capable of providing them with guidance:

> Sometimes I really hope there is a person I can discuss things with before making decisions. I cannot think of any specific decisions but have the

> feeling that it would be great having a person to talk to. I made most of decisions on my own, and probably some of them are wrong. My parents have been trying their best to help me although the help is not what I want. I understand they cannot give me instructions or suggestions for my career. They help a lot taking care of me and my children in the future, but for my career, I should make my own decisions and try my best.

On the other hand, many participants expressed having a different experience and approach regarding their parents' instrumental support. The participants claimed that they would prefer consulting with friends, classmates, or other peers rather than their parents to get suggestions or information for decision-making. They believed their parents would provide them with too much information and analysis on every option, which might limit their own thinking on the issues and eventually mislead them in terms of decision-making. It seemed that they were determined to explore autonomy on their own in order to live out what they truly wanted:

> I would go talk to my friends, classmates, my boyfriend, or anyone but my parents. If I talk to my parents for suggestions on making decisions, they would give me so much information including all the possibilities and analyses. Those ideas can restrict my own thoughts. I might think that they are so correct at first, but finally find that they are not and lose the opportunity to make the right decision. So I want to focus on my own ideas.

Not surprisingly, participants who were used to relying on their parents' suggestions and guidance tended to be more dependent on their parents in making decisions. One participant expressed her struggles with making her own decisions and her dependence on her parents for decision-making. She reported being afraid of making the wrong decisions and taking responsibility for the unpleasant consequences on her own:

> I don't have many ideas about what I want to do for work, so my parents influenced me a lot in terms of choosing a career. When choosing the major, my father told me that several majors should have good career prospects, and I followed his suggestions. However, sometimes I also feel pressured by their suggestions. For example, when I encountered

> difficulties in a path decided by my parents, I would think I should not choose this path at the beginning. But I am still used to asking their opinions when facing a problem, and I guess I might have a little bit of choice phobia. I have to ask other people for their opinions when making choices, probably because I am afraid of making a wrong decision. If I made a choice by myself and it turns out unsuccessful, I would be the only one taking the consequences.

Emotional support

Emotional support was another type of support offered by parents for participants' decision-making. Many participants mentioned that after entering college their parents provided considerable encouragement and trusted their decisions, increasing their confidence for decision-making: "My parents were very supportive. They supported all my decisions, because they knew that I had reasons to decide something. Even if I made wrong decisions, they still believed that it would be good for my growth." "My parents just said they would definitely give all their support and encouragement to the choices I made."

In addition, many parents had limited education and were not able to provide information and influence their children's decision-making. Emotional support seemed the best they could do to help their children in making decisions:

> My parents are farmers and do not know much about choosing majors and my study. Although my father is a high school graduate, he has not been following information related to education. He told me he has limited information and could not help with my study. So I should make decisions on my own and do what I want without regret.

Based on participants' reports, it seems that emotional support tended to promote the development of independence and confidence regarding decision-making: "As I entered college, my parents supported my decisions and rarely interfered. My mom

always believes that I will be so successful, and I believe that too."

Participants' Mental Health Situation in Developing Autonomy

In different stages of autonomy development, most participants reported conflicts and arguments with their parents for decision-making; however, they indicated that the conflicts were not serious and had no significant impact on their relationships with parents or their emotions. Even before entering college, when their lives were centered on study, the participants reported only mild conflicts with parents in making daily decisions. Participants demonstrated a general acceptance about following parents' opinions on decisions related to study. As participants began the active exploration for autonomy, they reported more conflicts with parents for making major decisions, which were related to their career and choosing a romantic partner. Those conflicts may have caused unpleasant experiences for participants and their parents, yet participants reported that the conflicts were still forgettable and had little impact on their emotions.

> Sometimes I felt frustrated about my father's overprotection and interference in my decisions, but my frustration was never that big. I always see things from both sides. My father is so protective of me because he loves me so much, and my families are very close to each other. It feels good having such a loving and protective family. I feel frustrated only when comparing myself to others who have more freedom.

Participants whose autonomy development was relatively delayed due to parents' overprotection and interference reported more concerns and negative feelings about adjusting to society, as well as fears of taking responsibility when making their own decisions:

> I feel very concerned about making decisions on my own. It can be scary that I have to collect information by myself for making decisions and have no one to consult with. I am afraid of making a wrong choice and taking

> the bad consequence. Fortunately, there were not many choices for me to make from elementary to high school. Regarding my future career, I would ask my family's opinions, after all they are more experienced.

Although participants reported conflicts or negative feelings and concerns due to their parents' overprotection and interference, they tended to have a generally good mental health situation. In contrast, 1 participant, who reported having no conflict at all with his parents, demonstrated a few psychosocial issues, including anxiety, distress, and social isolation. According to this participant, his parents left him with his grandparents when he was young and ran their own business in another city. His parents never interfered in his decision-making, and he could be as independent as he wanted. However, he did not enjoy the freedom and often felt insecure, helpless, and a lack of support: "It's not freedom. Actually I am more concerned than other students. Nobody helps me… In such a family, I feel I have more heavy stuff to consider."

In sum, a generally good psychosocial health situation was identified among most participants, although they reported parent-child conflicts as well as negative feelings associated with delayed autonomy development. Only 1 participant demonstrated psychosocial problems due to a serious lack of parental support, revealing the significant impact of parental support on participants' psychosocial well-being.

Differences Across Demographic Features

Study participants were relatively balanced in terms of demographic characteristics, such as age, gender, only/non-only child, and rural/urban origin. Although the findings on autonomy development and parental influence were nearly universal among the participants, there were still a few differences related to autonomy

development across gender, only/non-only child, and rural/urban origin. Female participants, as well as participants who were the only child in their families, were more likely to report being overprotected by parents than male and non-only-child participants. In addition, participants from rural areas tended to report lack of instrumental support from their parents and other sources more frequently than participants from urban areas.

Summary of Results

Study data revealed a relatively delayed development of autonomy among the participants. Before entering college, participants rarely had opportunities to explore their autonomy and relied mostly on their parents for decision-making. Between high school and college, participants were involved in choosing a college major after taking their college entrance examination. For many, this marked the first time in their lives they had participated in major decision-making. After the selection of a college major, participants started to actively explore autonomy in college by making various decisions on their own. Their own interests, rather than their parents' suggestions, became the driving force in their decision-making. However, as participants neared the end of their college studies, they tended to consider and incorporate parents' opinions more often in making decisions.

Simultaneously with participants' autonomy development, parents' attitudes towards their children's autonomy were changing. The parents used to pressure the participants to follow their opinions before college. After the participants entered college, however, their parents began to grant them more freedom in decision-making. Parents became more supportive and encouraged the participants to make their own decisions.

Parents provided two types of support, emotional and instrumental, to their children in the process of their autonomy development. The impact of the two types of support was contingent on the participants' individual needs. Despite a few differences across certain demographic features, these findings were generally universal among the participants.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter discusses a series of topics based on the findings. The topics include a) the unique pattern of Chinese college students' autonomy development, b) cultural and social factors that contribute to the pattern of Chinese college students' autonomy development, c) cultural differences regarding autonomy, d) Chinese college students' mental health situation and contributing factors, e) parental attitude change and contributing factors, and f) the relationship between types of social support and autonomy development. The final section of the chapter discusses the implications for policy, practice, and future research. The chapter concludes with a discussion of study strengths and limitations.

The Unique Pattern of Chinese College Students' Autonomy Development

As presented in the results chapter, the process of study participants' autonomy development was unique. Before entering college, participants' autonomy development went extremely slow. The slow development ended at the point of choosing a college major. After that point, when the participants entered college, their development of

autonomy suddenly soared. Correlatively, participants' consideration of their parents' opinions for decision-making grew like a parabola from before-college to after-college. Participants used to follow their parents' suggestions greatly before high school, and they considered their parents' opinions gradually less as they were close to entering college. During college, participants focused on their own interests without much consideration of their parents' ideas and tried to make decisions on their own. After college, however, participants' consideration of their parents' opinions for decision-making tended to increase again.

Study findings support emerging adulthood theory (EA) to a great extent, particularly its self-focusing feature, which explores how emerging adults make decisions based on their personal goals and values (Arnett, 2004). The current study reveals a similar pattern among participants, who focused on their own thoughts and interests when making decisions in college. However, EA anticipated that young people's self-focusing would last the entire period of emerging adulthood, which was not supported by the findings. Participants focused less on their thoughts and interests as they grew older and were close to graduation from college. This inconsistency may demonstrate differences in autonomy development for emerging adults across different cultures, a topic explored further in the section below entitled, Cultural Differences Regarding Autonomy.

Study results also revealed that in Chinese culture the expectation for autonomy in youth, especially in female youth, is significantly later than in Western culture; this is consistent with previous research (Fuligni, 1998). Unlike Chinese college students' autonomy development, American youths' autonomy development tended to be gradual and smooth. Individual autonomy has always been emphasized in Western culture, and

the development of a self-controlled, self-directed, and self-reliant child is viewed as the goal of all education (Gleitman, 1987; Hsu, 1981; Munroe & Munroe, 1975; Persell, 1984; Rohner & Pettengill, 1985). Therefore, the fostering of autonomy has always been emphasized by parents, and children are encouraged to develop their autonomy from a young age in Western culture. In adolescence, autonomy is supposed to develop intensively and is considered a major developmental task. In America, after 18 years of age, a young person is usually starting his or her independent life and thought to be autonomous. Thus, there seem no serious issues with youths' autonomy development in America (Kloep, 1999; Settersten, Furstenberg, & Rumbaut, 2005). Although today's young people are more apt to return to live with their parents after leaving home for education or work (Aquilino, 2005; Kloep & Hendry, 2010), their autonomy development enters a deeper level involving identity issues (Arnett, 2004). In general, researchers have found that the process of American youths' autonomy development is likely to be gradual and smooth, with adequate support from parents.

Furthermore, study participants' rapid development of autonomy in college indirectly indicated their lack of autonomy, consistent with previous studies on Chinese college students' psychosocial issues (Hu, 2010; Li, Wang, & Wang, 2009; Liu, 2005; Ma, 2007). However, in contrast with previous studies that emphasized the negative impact of the traditional culture on the autonomy development of Chinese college students (Hu, 2010; Liu, 2005; Ma, 2007), the results of this study demonstrated that the students explored their autonomy extensively without too much pressure from their traditional culture.

Cultural and Social Factors Contributing to the Unique Pattern

There was a complicated cultural and social background behind the unique pattern of autonomy development among Chinese college students in this study. Traditional Chinese culture and the education system could be two main factors contributing to that development.

Traditional Chinese Culture

Traditional Chinese culture values solidarity, concern for others, and integration with other people (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). It is important for Chinese people to establish interdependent, cooperative, and harmonious relations with other members of their families, groups, and society (Yi & Park, 2003). Such a collectivist culture seemed to form the unique pattern of autonomy development among Chinese college students. On one hand, in a Chinese collectivist culture, parents tended not to encourage their children to be independent at a young age; instead, they were used to taking care of their children and having the children be dependent on them. On the other hand, it was important for the children to be obedient to their parents in Chinese culture. A respectful child should follow his or her parents' opinions and help to maintain a harmonious relationship in the family. Therefore, it was reasonable that the participants followed their parents' ideas for decision-making before college.

Also, Chinese culture emphasizes the responsibilities of being an adult. In contrast with the understanding of adulthood in the United States, the definition of adulthood in Chinese culture highlights criteria related to obligations to other people, giving less emphasis to individualistic transitions (Arnett, 1998). Researchers have found

that Chinese young people tend to use the existence of adult responsibilities as the criteria for adulthood, such as marriage, parenthood, and the responsibility of caring for parents (Bian, Logan, & Bian, 1998; Nelson, Badger, & Wu 2004). Chinese college students are considered adults in terms of age. It is possible that study participants, as they entered college, began experiencing the pressure of being adults and taking adult responsibilities. Having adequate autonomy, which seems to be a necessity for adults, likely became an important goal for participants, who were eager to become autonomous and actively practice decision-making while in college.

In the current study, traditional Chinese culture as described above may explain why older participants tended to consider their parents' opinions more. Such consideration was different from participants' obedience to their parents before college. Their obedience before college usually was due to external pressures; however, their consideration of their parents' ideas after college seemed to be their own choice. It seemed that participants integrated traditional values into their personal values as they grew older and that they were internally motivated to take their parents' opinions into account after college.

Chinese Education System

The Chinese education system may be another important factor contributing to the particular pattern of autonomy development among study participants. In China, the college entrance examination is nationwide and highly competitive. The score on the examination determines what kind of degrees and majors a student can pursue. Furthermore, the Chinese higher education system is strict and not open to students'

changing their majors. Thus, how successful a student will be with the college entrance examination can determine the level of degrees, universities, and majors that he or she can enter, closely related to the student's future development and benefit.

With such a strict education system, Chinese students are encouraged to focus on academics beginning in elementary school. The pressure to achieve academically is particularly high in high schools (Nelson & Chen, 2007), given that it is close to the college entrance examination. Therefore, most participants' lives were centered around study, and they had few opportunities to explore different life experiences and make decisions on their own. That can be a significant factor contributing to participants' underdevelopment of autonomy before college. The pressure of focusing on study tended to disappear after entering college, thus supporting the participants' active exploration of autonomy.

Cultural Differences Regarding Autonomy

Self-determination theory (SDT) provides theoretical support for cultural differences when exploring autonomy. Based on SDT, those individuals who are intrinsically motivated are considered to be self-determined. In contrast, if individuals' behaviors are performed to meet external demands or rewards (Ryan & Deci, 2000), they are considered to be controlled and not autonomous. However, *extrinsic motivation* is distinguished by the extent of its *internalization* (Ryan & Deci, 2000). *Internalization* has been defined in SDT as "the natural tendency to strive to integrate socially-valued regulations that are initially perceived as being external" (Koestner & Losier, 2002, p.101). The greater degree of internalization of extrinsic motivation and the incorporation

of extrinsic motivation to a person's inner-self build a stronger foundation for autonomous activity (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Based on this idea, the meaning of autonomy in Chinese culture can be greatly distinct from American culture. In an American individualistic culture, it might be difficult to distinguish autonomy from psychological independence, and an autonomous person tends to focus on his or her own interests and ideas while making decisions. In Chinese collectivist culture, however, autonomy can be highly different from the American perspective. Chinese young people considering their parents' opinions while making decisions seem to be psychologically dependent, but actually can be very autonomous, because they deeply internalize the traditional cultural value of family interdependence to a high degree. They choose to take their parents' ideas into account because of their personal values and goals, which have incorporated the traditional collectivist values in Chinese culture. Thus, those young people may seem psychologically dependent and not autonomous from the perspective of American culture but could actually be autonomous. Therefore, based on SDT, a psychologically dependent person can be autonomous if his/her psychological dependence is from his/her own will.

Based on the above understanding of autonomy, older study participants who incorporated their parents' opinions into their decisions actually tended to be autonomous. This taking into account of their parents' opinions was different from participants' dependence on their parents before college, which usually was due to external pressure. However, incorporation of their parents' ideas after college seemed to be their own choice. It seems that participants internalized the traditional values as they grew older, and they were internally motivated to take their parents' opinions into

account after college.

In contrast, participants highly focusing on their own interests and thoughts in college were probably less autonomous than the older participants, although they seemed more psychologically independent. In examining the entire process of participants' autonomy development, their development in college was likely to be unbalanced and have many stressors. According to SDT, autonomy is closely related to a person's psychological well-being, that is, an autonomous person would be in a good place psychologically. Based on that idea, participants heavily focused on their own thoughts in college may not have been as autonomous as they appeared to be as they transitioned to a higher level of autonomy.

It can be argued that autonomy in a Chinese collectivist culture reflects the extent to which individuals behave based on a proper integration of individual interests and obligations to others, leading to psychological well-being. Despite individual differences, Chinese young people probably can be considered autonomous when they make decisions after considering their own opinions, as well as the possible impact on their families, or suggestions from significant others. Although it may appear that Chinese young people follow their families' opinions or are strongly influenced by families, they can still be autonomous if the result is based on consideration of others' opinions and negotiation.

Chinese College Students' Mental Health Situation and Contributing Factors

Study participants demonstrated a generally good mental health situation in the process of their autonomy development. Despite their parents' overprotection and the underdevelopment of autonomy before college, there were only mild conflicts between participants and their parents, and participants did not indicate feeling stressed or depressed. Chinese collectivist culture appears to be an important protective factor for participants' mental health. In Chinese culture it is considered normal to be highly dependent on one's parents before college. As self-determination theory would predict, internalizing that traditional value likely prevented participants from feeling controlled or inferior.

However, students whose autonomy development was delayed in college reported more concerns and negative feelings about adjusting to society, as well as fears of taking responsibility for unsuccessful decision-making. This finding was consistent with a previous study on Chinese college students' autonomy and its relation to social adjustment (Li, Qiu, & Wang, 2009). The results also echoed SDT in terms of the significance of autonomy for psychological well-being and optimal functioning. In addition, participants tended to experience stress and anxiety in the rapid development of autonomy in college. Therefore, students seem to need more support in college for their autonomy development.

It was also found that lack of parental support might lead to a number of psychosocial problems, such as anxiety, depression, and social isolation. This finding was consistent with a large number of studies demonstrating the importance of warm, loving,

and caring parents for adolescent and emerging adult well-being (Bender & Losel, 1997; Cornwell, 2003; Meadows, Brown, & Elder, 2006; Yarcheski & Mahon, 1999)

Parental Attitude Change and Contributing Factors

Parents' attitudes towards their children's autonomy development changed after high school. Parents tended to grant their children more and more freedom in making decisions. They were willing to let their children make final choices, although they still provided suggestions for major decisions. This change probably can also be attributed to Chinese traditional culture, which encourages interdependence among families rather than autonomy, while also emphasizing adult obligations towards family.

Before college, parents were likely to enjoy their children's dependence on them. Especially in families that have only one child, parents usually appreciate the close and interdependent relationship with the child. After their children entered college, however, parents began to expect them to act like adults and take on adult responsibilities, probably because, in their opinion, college was the start of adulthood in terms of age. Thus, parents began to treat their children as adults and grant them more freedom to support their transition to adulthood. This change made it possible for study participants to actively explore their autonomy during college.

Unfortunately, not all parents changed their attitudes as their children entered college. Most likely, in the families that emphasized interdependent parent-child relationships, parents did not recognize or prepare themselves for their children's needs for autonomy. A few participants from these more traditional families seemed to explore their autonomy towards the end of college or after college. This delay of autonomy

development tended to create issues for these participants' psychosocial development.

Types of Social Support and Autonomy Development

Based on study results, parents provided two types of social support, instrumental and emotional. Participants who had adequate emotional support from parents tended to be more confident and autonomous, probably because the warmth and nurturance provided by this form of social support (Taylor, 2011) can make people feel that they are valued and promote their general psychological well-being. Thus, emotional support sometimes is called esteem support or appraisal support (Wills, 1991). In addition, it is consistent with self-determination theory, according to which autonomy-supportive parents provide options and support of their children's ideas and encourage their competence (Gagne, 2003).

It could be particularly important for parents to offer emotional support, because study participants seemed able to get sufficient instrumental support from other sources, such as instructors and educated relatives. In the process of exploring autonomy, emotional support from parents could be a significant protective factor, assisting Chinese young people in dealing with various challenges and difficulties.

However, getting too much instrumental support tended to make study participants less confident and autonomous. Those participants who received a great amount of instrumental support were more likely to struggle with developing autonomy, even though instrumental support is considered a valuable resource to help people with problem-solving (Langford, Bowsher, Maloney, & Lillis, 1997). It is possible that too much instrumental support deprived study participants of opportunities for independently

solving problems and making decisions, hindering their exploration of autonomy. However, instrumental support also seemed to be necessary and beneficial for participants to some extent. Based on participants' reports, lack of instrumental support might cause a number of emotional problems, such as anxiety, distress, and feelings of helplessness.

It remains an open question as to what types of support from parents can best promote students' autonomy. The relationship between types of support and autonomy development can be rather complicated, as it likely depends on various individual factors, such as personality, experiences, and needs. Parental support might be most effective when it matches individuals' background and needs. However, it seemed fairly certain that lack of parental support could hinder young people's autonomy development and result in a number of psychosocial problems.

Implications

This study suggests a change in Chinese education policy should be considered. Reforms to the college entrance examination might allow students to pursue a more balanced and healthier life. Measuring other qualities in addition to academic performance could be part of the college entrance examination. For example, participation in community service and unique talents and skills could add points to students' examination scores, encouraging students to explore different aspects of life.

The findings also have implications for school counseling and social work practice in China. From elementary school to college, school counselors and social workers can learn to support students' autonomy development. Workshops, trainings, and

groups can be offered to help students explore their interests and career goals in life while developing decision-making strategies and skills. Group and individual counseling can be offered to assist students in dealing with difficulties and challenges related to autonomy development. In addition, school counselors or social workers could pay special attention to parent-child conflicts and help students negotiate with their parents on autonomy issues. Counselors or social workers can also provide parents with support for parenting, for example, by promoting autonomy-supportive parenting styles.

Based on the current findings, further studies in this area could focus on other groups of Chinese young people or a larger sample of Chinese college students for comparison purposes. Future research could explore the protective factors for students' autonomy development. For instance, research could seek to gain a more thorough understanding of how parental support helps with students' autonomy development. Future studies can examine what strategies may be helpful for social workers to promote Chinese students' autonomy within a collectivist culture. In addition, it is necessary to continue the exploration of how autonomy is related to Chinese students' psychosocial outcomes. Also, future research could continue the discussion on the application of emerging adulthood theory and self-determination theory in the lives of Chinese young people. It would be particularly beneficial if studies could survey parents to get their perspective on autonomy development in their children and the role they see themselves playing in that regard.

Strengths and Limitations

This exploratory study provides a base for future research on Chinese young people's autonomy and could serve future cross-cultural studies of youths' autonomy. The study can inform the modification of existing scales or the creation of new scales for future quantitative research on Chinese young people's autonomy. The study offers insights on the applicability of two theories, EA theory and SDT, among Chinese youth. Moreover, the study may contribute to the advancement of EA theory through offering new findings about emerging adults' self-focusing feature in a different culture.

However, this qualitative study has limited generalizability to other groups of Chinese youth. Particularly, study findings were drawn from a limited number of participants whose mental health was generally good and who were performing well academically; thus, the study may not have uncovered autonomy issues unique to students with mental health problems and/or who are struggling with their studies. In addition, study methods could be improved in several respects. For instance, different sources for data collection, such as focus groups, observation, and secondary qualitative data, could be introduced to improve the trustworthiness of the study.

In addition, autonomy is a complex concept indicating to what extent people behave according to internal motivation. This study only examined participants' decision-making behaviors to understand their autonomy development, and there was no exploration of other behaviors of the participants. Therefore, the findings on participants' autonomy development might be limited due to the incomplete exploration. Future research could investigate other types of behaviors of Chinese college students, exploring

self-control, self-discipline, and other concepts closely related to autonomy to seek a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of autonomy among this population.

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